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ABSTRACT

Tactics to deal with growing violence in schools have usually relied on removal of the offender by suspension or placement outside of the mainstream classroom. However, educators and psychologists are considering the prevention of violent behavior as both a more humane and cost-effective response to the problem. The relationship between school climate and school violence, the principal's role in the reduction of violence, strategies for teaching nonviolence to students, and preventative approaches for helping students with serious problems are described. Research has shown that violent student behavior can be alleviated through the development of a caring, inclusive school culture; programs that teach prosocial behavior and foster self-esteem; and collaboration with community social-service agencies. A highly visible principal can create school norms of nonviolence and community by cultivating relationships with students, encouraging a sense of ownership, and comprehensively addressing the roots of violent behavior, such as poverty, racism, and inadequate or abusive parenting. (LMI)

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School Violence Prevention

By Dean Walker

Eighty-nine percent of respondents in 700 cities and towns surveyed by the National League of Cities in 1994 said that school violence is a problem in their community (Randy Arndt 1994). Researchers have identified several major causes for the increase in violent behavior, causes so entangled that attempting to address one while ignoring another is to risk failure altogether. Poverty, racism, unemployment, substance abuse, easy access to weapons, inadequate or abusive parenting practices, and frequent exposure to violence through the media are all culpable (National Association for the Education of Young Children 1993).

Tactics to deal with the burgeoning violence of youth have been mostly one-dimensional, relying on removal of the offender by suspension or placement outside of the mainstream classroom. This can protect other students; however, it has proven ineffective in preventing children from developing criminal careers. Educators and psychologists are eyeing the *prevention* of violent behavior as both a more humane and more cost-effective response to this multidimensional problem (Hill Walker 1994).

What Can Schools Do to Prevent Violent Behavior?

While it would seem that the causes of violence lie outside the influence of schools, a violent incident can raise instructive questions about what the school might have done to prevent it. What is the school's policy on weapons and aggressive behavior? Were students aware of the policy, and is it consistently enforced? How is such behavior supported or discouraged by the school climate and the expectations of the staff and other students? What attempt has been made to teach students nonviolent conflict resolution? Are students appropriately supervised? Have staff members been taught to spot the potential for such incidents and to defuse them? Was there a gang influence in the incident (Joan L. Curcio and Patricia F. First 1993)?

The first step in school-violence prevention is performing a systematic assessment to answer these and other pertinent questions. One way to approach such an assessment systematically is to examine how the peaceful interaction of individuals and groups is facilitated by programs, policies, and processes at three levels: in the classroom, in the school building, and in the district office (Marie Somers Hill and Frank W. Hill 1994).

In the classroom, for example, research indicates that a focus on academic goals, modeling respectful behavior, and quick, nonintrusive intervention in misbehavior all discourage disorder, which can escalate into violence (Diane Aleem, Oliver Moles, and others 1993). The district office can continually train staff in violence-reduction issues and provide human-resource benefits such as personal counseling or liberal leave policies to improve staff morale and functioning (Hill and Hill).

How Are School Climate and School Violence Related?

Studies have shown that schools with low levels of violent behavior are distinguished from those with high levels by a positive school climate where nurturance, inclusiveness, and community feeling are evident. Students who feel recognized and appreciated by at least one adult at school will be less likely to act out against the school ethos of nonviolence (H. Walker).

A schoolwide discipline plan helps foster a peaceful, caring student culture. Structures should be created to achieve two aims: to actively teach and reinforce children in highly visible ways for exhibiting basic prosocial behaviors, and to consistently and fairly hold children accountable for misbehavior (Hill Walker, Geoff Colvin, and Elizabeth Ramsey 1995).

Creating an appealing, noninstitutional atmosphere in the building can contribute to a positive school climate. Quickly repairing vandalism and showing care for the premises discourage further vandalism. Getting students involved with beautifying the building and grounds heightens feelings of ownership and community (Sandra R. Sabo 1993).

What Role Does the Principal Play in Violence Reduction?

The principal can help establish school norms of nonviolence and community by developing sincere, caring relationships with groups of students and individuals. By maintaining a high profile, walking the halls, visiting classrooms, and being accessible to students and staff, the principal reduces the likelihood of antisocial behavior (Stephanie

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Kadel and Joseph Follman 1993).

The principal can encourage a sense of ownership of school programs and policies by sharing power with site-based management teams. This makes it more likely that discipline plans and academic goals will be supported consistently, thus improving school climate (Aleem, Moles, and others).

Finally, the principal can make sure that the roots of violent behavior are comprehensively addressed. He or she must take advantage of federal breakfast and lunch programs, institute antiracism programs, speak out against all harassment, and make social services available to students who need them (Curcio and First).

Can Students Be Taught Nonviolence?

Curricula aimed at teaching children prosocial skills are based on the belief that violent behavior is learned through modeling and reinforcement and that these same processes can be used to teach children nonviolence (Committee for Children 1989). Few tightly controlled studies have been done on the effectiveness of these curricula because of the time and cost involved. But Edward Zigler, professor of psychology at Yale University, advises school officials to use these curricula, saying they "look promising," even though evaluations are not complete (Millicent Lawton 1994).

Schools must take advantage of our proven ability to identify children as young as three who are at risk for delinquency and target these students for early intervention. Hill Walker, associate dean of the College of Education at the University of Oregon, has piloted an early intervention program in Eugene, Oregon. Called *First Steps*, the program enlists school staff and peers to teach and reinforce prosocial behavior. Parents learn to teach their children how to succeed at school (Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey).

Many elementary, middle, and high schools in America have instituted peer conflict-resolution programs. Most begin by training students in empathy, cooperation, and perspective-taking, and all teach a process to help peers settle differences peacefully. Again, formal research on the effectiveness of these programs has been limited, but data are accumulating that show peer conflict-resolution programs reduce discipline referrals; improve the school climate; and increase self-esteem, confidence, and responsibility in the students who go through training (M. Van Slyck and M. Stern 1991).

How Can Schools Reduce Violence by Children with Serious Problems?

When children face poverty or abuse or other problems that ultimately foster violent behavior, schools can collaborate closely with community social-service agencies to provide children and their families with timely and affordable access to counseling, financial assistance, and protection. Parent education at school for families of children who are in trouble can create bonds between family and school that will benefit both (Stephanie Kadel and Joseph Follman 1993).

Sharing information with police and planning antigang interventions with the school community are vital to preventing gang-related youth violence (Robert P. Cantrell and Mary Lynn Cantrell 1993). If a preventative approach to school violence is going to work, schools and communities must stand together in every aspect of its implementation.

RESOURCES

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